

# Grace says insulation not hazardous

## ■ Company tells EPA vermiculite is a problem for occupational workers

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A team of W.R. Grace representatives told the Environmental Protection Agency last week that Zonolite attic insulation is safe and a health emergency declaration in Libby to remove it from buildings is unnecessary.

The meeting was held on Thursday, Jan. 31, in Washington, D.C., and lasted 1½ hours.

The overall theme of Grace's presentation was that the risk is occupational and not to the overall population, said Jack McGraw, acting director of Region 8, which includes Montana.

Company officials pointed out that none of the lawsuits against Grace involved Zonolite attic insulation.

Grace also challenged the testing methods and data collected in Libby saying the agency was over-counting asbestos fibers in the vermiculite.

Company scientists also noted that results from testing Libby area residents for asbestos-related disease were not relevant because no connection has been made between disease and the insulation.

The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry tested more than 6,200 people and found nearly 2,000 of them showed signs of having asbestos-related disease.

"There was a real strong pitch that Zonolite is a safe product," McGraw said.

Grace mined and processed vermiculite in the Libby area from the early 1960s to 1990. The vermiculite is

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## EPA meeting

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contaminated with varying amounts of toxic tremolite asbestos fibers.

"Considering the cumulative effect of all the exposure routes, in addition to the Zonolite insulation, we feel the agency should consider removing the insulation," McGraw said.

He and other regional EPA employees - including Libby onsite coordinator Paul Peronard - listened to the presentation via telephone.

"They wanted us to listen and look at their facts," McGraw said. "There was hardly any dialogue with no arguing back and forth."

McGraw called the discussion "highly technical." The EPA officials participating in the meeting were not political appointees but career agency people, he said.

"I don't know if we're going to respond," McGraw said. "I don't know if we're plowing new ground here."

Grace officials did note that if they have to pay for cleanup costs of Zonolite insulation removal they may not be able to cover other existing claims, McGraw said.

"Removing the insulation

from buildings in the Libby area is not that big an expense," McGraw said. "Nationwide, it is big money."

It is estimated that 10 million to 15 million buildings in the United States contain Zonolite insulation.

"Right now our focus is on Libby," McGraw said. "We in Region 8 are not calling for a nationwide cleanup. That decision will have to be made higher up."

McGraw said there were no surprises in the meeting and he doesn't expect any surprise reactions from the EPA.

"If the Libby community wants to send a representative group to Washington, D.C., to meet with the same EPA people, we can discuss that," McGraw said. "At this particular moment, I don't see a need."

The EPA has never declared a health emergency before in the U.S. Because Superfund law prevents the EPA from removing construction materials from buildings, the emergency is needed to remove the vermiculite insulation. Peronard, in a separate document from the request to declare Libby a National Priorities Listing site on the Superfund list, has asked for the emergency health declaration.

The Superfund request is expected to be published in the Federal Register in March.

Because Gov. Judy Martz decided to use the state's only "silver bullet," a fast track to Superfund, McGraw said the follow-up comment period will be limited in duration. Libby could be on the NPL by mid-summer.

